
Art as Radar or Antidote: "for Technical Democracy"

Jean-Paul Fourmentraux

Translator: Simon Pleasance



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Cinéma, interactivité et société, Bruxelles : VDMC, 2013. Sous la dir. de Jean-Marie Dallet
La Télévision et les arts : soixante années de production, Rennes : Presses universitaires de
 Rennes, 2014, (Le Spectaculaire). Sous la dir. de Roxane Hamery

Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast : 1954*, Alfortville : Ere ; Bourogne : Espace multimédia
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- 1 What is the use of digital tools, and who uses them? Is it possible to do things with them other than what they have been designed for? Can the user re-assume a certain power with regard to ever more complex technical solutions which are formatted with commercial goals in mind? In his critical theory of technique, Andrew Feenberg discusses digital tools which he analyses as tools of social rationalization at the service of agencies of domination. But he does not confine himself to this determinist vision: the appropriation of technologies is also a social joint construction. Digital technologies actually seem to be marked by a new kind of instability, and subordinate groups (users) may display their influence running counter to hegemonic forces by way of strategies of appropriation, bypassing, rejection, and the like. The success of certain tools and technologies is consequently associated with the simultaneous invention of their uses, to a greater degree than is admitted, to the point where it is at times these uses which represent real innovation. Let us take, for example, perspective, photography, the most contemporary video tools for recording reality, and the very latest digital information networks: if the main driving force behind their innovativeness is technological,

stemming as such from strategic, scientific and even military research, their social (re)cognition originates just as much in the cultural world and in the world of artistic creation. Their success and their diffusion, which are hard to promote, and which, most of the time, cannot be fully pre-defined or anticipated, actually presuppose an initial social appropriation of these technologies.

- 2 The approach proposed by Andrew Feenberg may overlap with the works of that "prophet of the electronic age" and Canadian theoretician, Marshall McLuhan, whose interest in technology and the media foreshadowed many lines of thinking and many works on the interface of the arts, the sciences, and technologies. These two authors develop the idea whereby artefacts which are successful are those which find footholds in the social environment, and emphasize the capacity of users to re-invent the techniques they adopt. This approach finds areas of back-up and development in different scientific circles: the anthropology of networks, situated action and distributed cognition which have all incorporated technical objects in their plans involving activity analysis, and propose broaching the organization of technical and social facts in a more head-on manner. The relation to technical objects does not arise solely from instrumentation and alienation, but can also take place in the mode of frequentation and contact, and even games. This interpretative shift has made it possible to re-visit different realms of social life: the manufacture of scientific discoveries and industrial innovations, including the most everyday activities endowed with a broad variety of technical objects, themselves put to the test of social relations.¹ By re-situating human interactions in places, practices and worlds of objects, these approaches put forward alternatives to the theories of technical determinism and social constructivism.
- 3 In this context, works of art and/or art praxis are sometimes called upon to play a specific part: as with Marshall McLuhan, according to whom "art seen as *anti-milieu* or *antidote* becomes more than ever a way of forming perception and judgement". This latter wagered on "the power of the arts to outpace a future social and technological evolution, sometimes more than a generation ahead. Art is a radar, a sort of remote detection system, which enables us to detect social and psychological phenomena early enough to prepare ourselves for them [...]". If art is a system of "preliminary alert", as radar used to be called, "it can become extremely relevant not only for studying the media, but also for creating ways of dominating them."² This question of appropriation—or hijacking—overlaps with art praxis in which we see artists adopting inventiveness in the use of unforeseen solutions involving digital tools, and where we also see the rejection of imposed solutions. Because of the experimental and often pioneering character of artistic creation, we can in fact expect it to take an active part in this joint invention of technological uses, to the point, at times, of transforming the technologies themselves, by helping to re-define the form and the methods of their socialization. Art movements such as video art, sociological art, the aesthetics of communication, network art and, nowadays, Internet art have grown up, for example, around an experimentation with communication technologies, and given rise to many art installations and arrangements which widely foreshadowed the development of the Internet, as we know and use it today. If, however, in the arena of contemporary art and digital technology, the issue of media appropriation and hijacking has become a decisive one, its realization is still a challenge that is not easy to meet.
- 4 While the book edited by Roxane Hamery goes back over 60 years of (co)production, it also sheds light on the dilemmas of the historically controversial relation between

"television and the arts". If television has managed to organize an arena lot for the production and distribution of films about art—but through numerous interviews with film directors the book shows the extent to which this slot granted in programme schedules to television films and documentaries dealing with art has sometimes had to be won at the price of fierce symbolic battles—, video art, which has made television its creative medium, has had to find other avenues to become both legitimate and recognized. It actually remained for a long time on the sidelines both of television programmes which deemed this practice to be too experimental, and of contemporary art worlds which did not acknowledge the legitimacy of this technical fascination. The long-drawn-out history of the relations between art and technology is less harmonious than it may seem. These relations are usually asymmetrical between the art world and the world of scientific research, and industrial innovation. They draw their rapid growth around a cultural conflict or a confrontation between institutions and people whose end purposes are, on the face of it, opposed, belonging to divided social worlds. By way of example, when, in the 1970s, television stations agreed to open their "research and development" studios to artists in residence, it was less with the aim of encouraging the creation of artworks than to position experimental work with a view to applying it directly to the conception of new television programmes devised for the general public. Artistic experimentation thus became a bonus, with an increase in value, for the industrial project, insomuch as it was likely to bring forth unexpected developments, and encourage new uses of television. Broadly accompanied by television technicians, the operation was aimed at an improvement of the television language, usually to the detriment of the specific and special nature of the artistic projects. This "service" relationship, typical of the early partnerships between institutional television and video art, was not immune from criticism: "Once in the television station, you had to take the technician along with the studio", observed the artist Bill Viola in 1970, not without irony.³ Certain works nevertheless made it possible to develop a line of thinking and a critical way of looking at media developments. Like photography and film, the media innovation represented by television would be the object of a lengthy series of artistic appropriations and hijackings. Material nature and technical functional features form the core of the works of Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell, who aimed at physically destroying television (video sculptures) or intervened more symbolically in the medium by altering the video signal.

- 5 Nowadays, the growth of the digital arts is attempting to learn from the fact—often mentioned but more rarely explored—that visual and musical works, like literary works, only exist and endure through the interpretative activity of their successive publics.⁴ In this context, the appearance of interactivity represented an object of heuristic study at the same time as a form of original creation. Because, as we are reminded by Jean-Marie Dallet, coordinator of the book *Cinéma interactivité et société*: "Technical plans do not appear out of the blue, they are part of a history of technologies, meaning also part of a genealogical series" (p. 11). In order to shed light on the challenges and dilemmas of this network between art and technology, the book's authors take us to the "limits of film",⁵ before deploying "histories of interactivity",⁶ like so many "forms of another cinema"⁷ where we can see the emergence of a new "aesthetics of information".⁸ The plurality of overlapping ways of looking at things presented by the book (art, science, technology) is extremely rich. One of its principal interests is to show the complexity of interactive forms of techniques (projections, installations, systems and arrangements, cinematographic algorithms), but also the ambivalences of the conceptual notion of interactivity (consubstantial with contemporary digital creation) which seems here to be

nothing if not controversial. The retrospective eye, illuminating primitive and archetypal forms of what was not yet called interactivity, combined with the critical eye—and not simply a forward-looking one—cast over techniques and technologies, offers a very rich perspective on new forms of experiment and expression in film in the digital age.

- 6 The book edited by Jean-Marie Dallet analyses these new figures of the image and their relational modes in a context where the application of art becomes inseparable from the praxis of evolving and porous media. At the crossroads of the sociology of uses and artistic innovation, it is a matter of putting into perspective these forms of attachment to Internet art, which reveal new media systems. Shared between artists, engineers and publics, the presentation of interactivity materializes restrictive factors as much as it creates media appropriations, interpretations and actions. These systems lead to no longer separating producers and users, restrictions and resources. Their performative character opens up areas of play and negotiation. The many meanings of the concept of system/arrangement have plentifully fuelled the digital arts.⁹ From Michel Foucault to Roland Barthes, from the science of signs (semiotics) to the new theories of information and communication, people are currently veering towards the perspectival creation of the active, and socio-technical, character of all systems. Michel Foucault (1975) underscored the ambivalence of this by emphasizing the determinism of surveillance systems, such as the disciplinary panopticon, which are only valid through the action of their subjects, an action that is necessary for their actualizations.¹⁰ According to Giorgio Agamben (2007), the trick of the system is that it functions in harmony with the "subjectivization" which it itself produces, and thus with the implicit agreement of the subject, for whom the "desecration" of the system is always possible.¹¹ Marshall McLuhan (1968) and Roland Barthes (1984) both underlined this intricateness of the system, between frame and action, on the terrain of media experience.¹² From this viewpoint, the concept of system/arrangement is akin to other notions with which it conjugates an intentionally pragmatic vision of society and technology: borrowing from the concepts of attachment, configuration or arrangement, and implementation.¹³ This involves shedding light on the action of those who conceive precisely where mediation comes into play, not with, but in the technical environment, in so doing pursuing the direction of research ushered in by the sociology of mediation developed by Antoine Hennion (2007).¹⁴
- 7 One contribution of pragmatist aesthetics has been to show how to go beyond the "great divisions", between opus and work, subject and object, in order to focus on their joint construction in the course of situated social interactions. Works of art represent the space and the result of a collective and instrumented praxis that one can plan to study without removing from social relations all the objects which let them exist, but, on the contrary, by attributing a similar analytical credit to the different actors (players and objects), contributing to it.¹⁵ Applied to the worlds of art, this principle of symmetry makes it possible to grasp as much what people do with works as what works make them do: the doing-doing of artworks. Like *experience*, art is in fact invariably transactional, contextual (situational), space-time-related, qualitative, narrative, etc. Experience, as defined by John Dewey—and even if this term may have a many-meaning'd value in its vocabulary—is to be understood in terms of relation, interaction and transaction, between beings and entities which are not primary, but which emerge through interaction.¹⁶ This "pragmatist philosophy of aesthetics" (John Dewey, 2005, 2010, Richard Shusterman, 1992) is less concerned with the essentialist qualifications of art than with its contextual and heteronomous functions. Contrasting with discourses which grant art a status of

exception, by removing it from the daily round of life, John Dewey and Richard Shusterman have promoted an operational vision of art in the city. They have demonstrated all the benefit that may be derived by seeing art in its operational dimension, like an operator of practices which shift the lines of our ordinary experience. Art which becomes involved in the arena of public debate is incorporated in a history, and makes citizens capable of creating and transforming their world.¹⁷

NOTES

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2. McLuhan Marshall. *Pour comprendre les médias : les prolongements technologiques de l'Homme*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1968, pp.15-17
3. For an analysis of this phenomenon in the context of video praxis and the emergence of a "video art", cf. Duguet, Anne-Marie. *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, Paris : Hachette Littérature, 1981, and Sturken, Marita. "Les grandes espérances et la construction d'une histoire : paradoxe de l'évolution d'une forme artistique", *Communications*, n°48, 1988, pp. 125-148
4. Carrying on from the theses of Etienne Souriau quoted in note 1, Eco, Umberto. *L'Œuvre ouverte*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1965. In the field of digital arts, cf. Fourmentaux, Jean-Paul. *Art et Internet : les nouvelles figures de la création*, Paris : CNRS, 2010.
5. With essays by Jacques Aumont, Victor Burgin, Bernard Perron, Louise Poissant and Bernard Steigler.
6. With Samuel Bianchini, Jean-Louis Boissier, Luc Courchesne, Anne-Marie-Duguet and Jean-Paul Fourmentaux.
7. With Jean-Claude Bustros, Jim Campbell, Julien Maire, Jeffrey Shaw, Steina Vasulka, and Gwenola Wagon.
8. With Bertrand Augereau, Yves Bernard, Masaki Fujihata, George Legrady, Yannick Prié & Vincent Puig, Frédéric Curien and Jean-Marie Dallet.
9. Jacquinet-Delaunay Geneviève, Monnoyer Laurence. "Le dispositif : entre usage et concept", *Hermès*, n°25, CNRS, 1999
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11. Agamben Giorgio. *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif ?*, Paris : Petite Bibliothèque Rivage, 2007
12. McLuhan, Marshall quoted in note 2. Barthes, Roland. "En sortant du cinéma", *Le Bruissement de la langue : Essais critiques IV*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1984, p. 407-412
13. Latour, Bruno. *Changer de société : refaire de la sociologie*, Paris : La Découverte, 2005. Genette, G. Gérard. *L'Œuvre de l'art*, Paris : Le Seuil, 1996. Goodman, Nelson. *L'Art en théorie et en action*, Paris : L'Eclat, 1996
14. Hennion, Antoine. *La Passion musicale : une sociologie de la médiation*, Paris : Métailié, 2007. On the recent development of amateur activities in the age of Web 2.0 and social networks, cf. also Cardon, Dominique. *La Démocratie Internet*, Paris : Le Seuil, 2010, (La République des Idées). Flichy, Patricia. *Le Sacre de l'amateur*, Paris : Le Seuil, 2010.

15. Fourmentraux, Jean-Paul. *Art et Internet : les nouvelles figures de la création*, Paris, CNRS, 2010

16. "Be it in his scientific practices, his artistic activities, or his everyday tasks, the human being is mainly a *being-in-relation*, or, in ecological terms, an organism interacting *with* and *in* an environment, whether this latter be simply physical and biological or more specifically human, social and cultural". (Dewey, John. *L'Art comme expérience*, Pau : Publications de l'université de Pau ; Farrago, 2005)

17. As heir to the pragmatic American approach (Charles Sander Peirce, William James), John Dewey underscores the active role of intelligence and its capacity to steer action, in an educational programme of *learning by doing*. According to John Dewey, authentic democracy is a "creative" democracy, at the heart of which men and woman are free, by way of imagination (art), to invent original and enriching ways of interacting with each other and with the world around them. Artistic activity is here understood as one of the "means whereby, through imagination and emotions [...], we enter into other forms of relations and participations than our own". (Dewey, John. *L'Art comme expérience*, *op. cit.*, p. 382). Art, as experience, here stems from an experimental perspective, for which the work is likely to be revised, corrected and improved with time, on the basis of places, needs and requirements.